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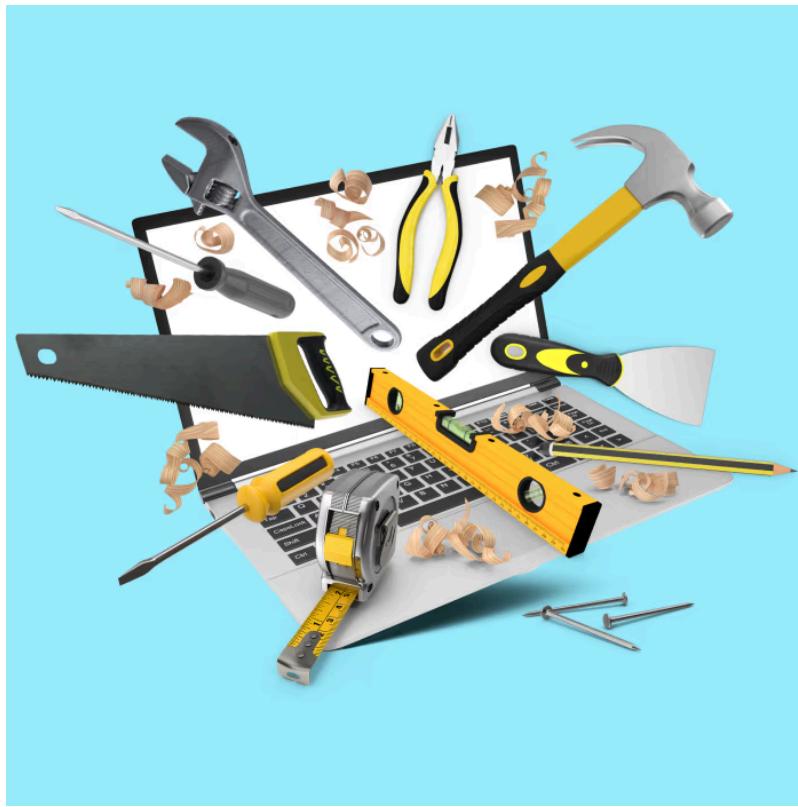
White-Collar Workers Shouldn't Dismiss a Blue-Collar Career Change

It's time for those struggling with a midcareer slump to consider another path



By [Callum Borchers](#) [Follow](#)

Jan. 14, 2026 9:00 pm ET



ELENA SCOTTI/WSJ;PIXELSQUID

Could your pride handle working in construction, security or at an auto-body shop? The best way to get over your midcareer slump might be to get over yourself first.

Layoffs and stagnant wages have a lot of white-collar workers feeling stuck. I hear constantly from people who have applied to a hundred or more desk jobs without luck. Meanwhile, [blue-collar industries](#) face a labor shortage.

Pivoting to something more hands-on, or to an industry outside traditional white-collar havens such as tech/finance/media/marketing, is an option many professionals don't consider. That is even though the jobs and industries are generally less vulnerable to artificial intelligence, the earning potential is often comparable, and the work-life balance is frequently better.

I know, I know. It takes years to master a trade and make good money at it. Starting in your 30s or 40s leaves a short window before your back and knees give out. A bruised ego isn't the only obstacle to a career change.

"To get paid at the level I need, I think I would have to get certified as a journeyman electrician or something," says Justin Johnson, 47 years old, who lost his \$130,000 job as a software project manager when a government contract ended last year. "That would be very difficult to do because I'm the breadwinner in the household, and you get accustomed to a certain lifestyle."

For someone like Johnson, switching industries would likely require an initial step back, moneywise. But in a blue-collar job market being reshaped by technology and private equity, there are faster routes to six-figure paychecks than learning a skilled trade—ones that are easier on the joints, too.

No sweat

Crash Champions, a car-repair chain with about 650 shops in 38 states, is hungry for service advisers. The role involves assessing damage, estimating the cost to fix it and overseeing the process. You don't need to sweat under the hood; you just need to know a lot about cars.

For those who don't, there is a six-month apprenticeship program. The starting salary is roughly \$60,000. That would be a pay cut for many white-collar workers, but service advisers can double their salaries in 18 months, says Chief Executive Officer Matt Ebert.

He adds that this job is often a path to becoming the general manager of a shop and eventually a director in charge of several locations. Directors make more than \$200,000 a year. New hires can reach that level in a matter of years, not decades.

This is because Crash Champions is among the slew of blue-collar businesses to attract [private-equity investments](#) in recent years. A company that had 13 locations in 2019 is growing so rapidly that employees tend to be promoted quickly. Still, converting people from offices to garages is a challenge.



Crash Champions CEO Matt Ebert says his private-equity-backed company is growing quickly, which can help employees earn promotions and six-figure salaries. **DANNY BRIONES**



Power Home Remodeling co-CEO Asher Raphael joined the construction business when he didn't have other job offers after college. **POWER HRG**

than would typically work in our space," Raphael says.

He adds that someone who works in tech sales, earning \$85,000 to \$100,000 a year, could make a lateral move to Power Home Remodeling. A 10-week "craftsmanship academy" brings new hires up to speed.

"Some of it is the stigma," says Ebert, who, like 83% of his team, didn't earn a degree. "For someone who went to college, heading in a new direction like this is almost like admitting defeat, and it takes a little bit of courage to do that."

Transferable skills

It took courage and a dearth of options to alter Asher Raphael's course. With no other job offers after college, he accepted a sales position at Power Home Remodeling, thinking he would stay for a year, then go to law school.

Twenty-three years later he is still there, as co-CEO. The company is now PE-backed, with 4,700 employees and \$1.73 billion of revenue last year.

He says a key to growth is avoiding the things customers hate about dealing with contractors. These include poor communication and an inability to stick to deadlines or budgets—in short, a lack of professionalism. So, professional types are ideal hires.

"We've been focused on getting a higher-caliber person to work for us

But the company generally has better luck recruiting Gen Zers, whom some have branded the [toolbelt generation](#) because they are wary of college debt and AI's potential to replace entry-level office jobs. The share of workers in their early 20s who are employed in blue-collar roles rose from 16.3% in 2019 to 18.4% in 2024, according to the payroll-software company ADP. This increase was five times the uptick among 35- to 39-year-olds.

Experienced workers have been slower to recognize job-market shifts that create new roles in construction and similar industries. This is a missed opportunity because a lot of the open roles call for management and technology skills—the very things an office veteran could bring to the table, says ADP Industry Executive Kit Dickinson.

Sunk cost

Those who wince at the idea of a blue-collar career change don't necessarily look down on people who work with their hands. Sometimes the resistance is more about a sunk-cost mindset, says Amy Glaser, senior vice president of business operations at the recruiting firm Adecco.

After shelling out for college and amassing years of experience, it is natural to fixate on jobs in your one field to justify those investments. But a blue-collar turn can be temporary. Academic and office credentials might prove useful again in the future.

For example, they could be an asset in the upper ranks of Specialized, a security firm. Managers and executives at the company can earn \$100,000 to \$500,000 a year.

Getting there requires at least a brief stint as a front-line security officer to build credibility as a leader. Typical starting pay for unarmed guards—people without military or police backgrounds—is about \$20 to \$25 an hour and is pegged to a living-wage calculator for each location.

CEO Vince Carrabba, who dropped out of college, argues people make too much of professional distinctions.

"I hate using 'white-collar' and 'blue-collar,'" he says. "What will those terms even mean in five years?"

The line does seem blurry when we're talking about a construction-company employee who sticks to sales or a car-repair service adviser whose principal tool is a tablet instead of a wrench.



Vince Carrabba, CEO of Specialized, says the line between white- and blue-collar work is getting blurry. MATTHEW DEAN SUROFF/SPECIALIZED

Career changes are never easy, but this is no time to let status and labels get in the way of the right long-term move.

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